

8 June 1967

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: U.S. Interests and the Vietnamese Elections

SUMMARY

25X1 This memorandum addresses itself to three questions which have been posed regarding the forthcoming national elections in Vietnam:
(1) Will Ky win the election? (2) Is it in the U.S. interest for him to win?

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1. Will Ky Win the Election? Ky will almost certainly win if Thieu withdraws from the contest. Ky's chances of winning will be slightly better than even if Thieu resigns from the Army and runs as a civilian candidate, thereby minimizing the prospects for an open split of the "establishment." If Thieu remains in the Army and runs as an alternate government candidate, however, Ky's chances of victory would be less than even, since Ky and Thieu would be competing not only for the military vote but also for the support of essentially the same pro-Government, nationalist groups. Under these circumstances, Ky's entourage (e.g., Loan) might be able to salvage victory through blatant manipulation and fraud, but such a victory would be Pyrrhic in character, would open serious wounds within the military, would sow seeds of instability and popular revulsion, and would negate the progress made thus far in the political development process.

2. Do We Want Ky to Win? Among all the potential contenders, Ky offers the most net attractions. He has demonstrated political skill and increasing maturity; he has grown steadily into his responsibilities. We know

we can work with him and that he can produce results as an executive. His ideals are basically sound and have potential political appeal. His policies and aims are generally consistent with ours. His victory would offer optimum prospects for continuity and momentum in our jointly developed programs, for cooperation between military and civilian elements, for development of a genuinely broad political organization, and for effective communication between the urban and rural masses, on the one hand, and the governmental and national political leadership on the other.

3. A victory by Thieu would be less compatible with U.S. interests. Thieu probably would not have the full support and cooperation (even after winning) of the critically important Young Turk military element, and he would not attract as wide a political base as Ky among civilian groups. A government headed by Thieu would most likely be less flexible, dynamic and progressive in its approach to solutions of Vietnam's problems and more inclined to be Mandarin, rigid and paternalistic in the Diem pattern. Thieu's principal support stems from the older political generation, which is steeped in traditional (and ineffectual) Vietnamese political forms and practices and which has little appeal to the youth.

4. A victory by Tran Van Huong would be potentially disruptive, particularly if it were achieved at the expense of the Thieu-Ky rivalry. Although much of Huong's appeal derives from his integrity and southern origin, his victory would be dependent on strong support from extremist, anti-establishment elements -- Gaullist-oriented southern separatists and militant Buddhists -- whose views he would be unable to ignore. While he had indicated he might be able to work with Ky after the election, his compulsion to do so would diminish if the military establishment were split during the campaign, and his ability to do so effectively would be limited by virtue of the character and prejudices of his political base. The factors which contributed to the instability of his brief tenure as Prime Minister in late 1964 -- the fundamental clash between the military and the Buddhist extremists -- would militate against the prospects for success another time around.

5. A victory by Phan Khac Suu -- which is most unlikely in any event -- would not offer hopeful prospects either for stability or for effective government. Suu himself has never demonstrated political astuteness or effective leadership ability, and it is unlikely that the more dynamic and progressive Dr. Dan -- his prospective running mate -- could effectively counter Suu's unfortunate weaknesses.

6. On balance, U.S. interests would best be served if Ky were to win in a reasonably clean contest, and if he were to broaden the base of his post-election government by honoring his reported commitment to incorporate Huong as Prime Minister. Such a government would offer optimum prospects for stability, continuity, and development of a mass, popular base. Moreover, it would represent the optimum political challenge to the Communists, since any other result would offer prospects for instability which the Communists could nurture to their ultimate advantage.

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